The Texas Professoriate and Public Political Discourse Before and After 9/11

Thomas G. Palaima

Robert Jensen's critique of the participation of academic intellectuals in Texas in public political discourse after the 9/11 terrorist attacks underestimates what professors have done to inform a politically apathetic public about warfare, American foreign policy, civil liberties, and cultural and humanitarian issues. Jensen undervalues non-confrontational political strategies and broader forms of intellectual political engagement. Confrontational strategies mobilize citizens inclined to activism, but less overtly political strategies invite larger numbers of citizens to think seriously about politics. Jensen's locally famous post-9/11 Houston Chronicle editorial is analyzed as rhetorically egocentric and alienating, and ultimately counter-productive in the post-9/11 political environment.

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Robert Jensen argues that, following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, American intellectuals were either inactive or ineffective in using public intellectual discourse to influence the political process. It is particularly important for us to consider his analysis now that 9/11 has led to public support for an unprecedented American preemptive attack upon a foreign nation. Bob thinks what many of us think: American intellectuals on the left of the political spectrum could have done more after 9/11 to influence American public opinion against using massive military force as a response to terrorism.

Bob defines the American intellectual world as “professional academics, journal-
ists, free-floating pundits and the think-tank crowd.” But he focuses on academic intellectuals and uses the University of Texas at Austin as a microcosm. My own views of the politics of American public intellectualism and what went on at UT Austin in the weeks after 9/11 differ from his. I believe that he underestimates the influence of American college and university professors who are engaged in public intellectual work, but whose strategies, goals, and objectives differ from those of the confrontational politics he himself favors. This is true despite the obvious fact that we are now at war.

Bob analyzes intellectual responses to 9/11 politically into five categories from far right to far left and describes how active and effective each category is. The two extremes are active. Bob calls them the Ultra Hawks and the Anti-Empire Crowd. The Ultra Hawks control power, and, as Operation Iraqi Freedom demonstrates, they believe in using military force to protect American interests. Bob credits them with at least the publicly expressed belief that the United States is a benevolent empire, a notion President Bush and White House advisers used repeatedly to influence public opinion during the prelude to war against Iraq.

Bob puts himself in the Anti-Empire Crowd, the only group that: (1) offers any “principled critique” of American foreign policy, (2) “engage[s] in public education and political organizing,” and (3) adopts “an internationalist perspective” that rejects the “intellectually and morally bankrupt claims” of the far right. Intellectuals in the three middle groups, by inference, promote, tacitly accept, or do nothing to oppose the far right’s intellectual and moral bankruptcy, either because (1) they see no need for honest and open debate—in the case of the Hawks because they control opinion already and only stand to lose support by debating, or (2) they shy away from the kinds of confrontation needed to change public opinion. Bob places me among the Political Doves-with-Wings-Pinned, and explains this by citing from our correspondence about the reactions of the general public and the administration and faculty at UT Austin to his controversial Houston Chronicle editorial of 14 September 2001. The Wings-Pinned group speaks out against bombing as “bad policy” but avoids doing anything to confront American cultural mythology, “lest we offend, because offending people is bad.” The Cultural Doves meanwhile argue for international “cultural understanding” but avoid overt criticism of war or engagement in any serious political issues.

Bob’s critical stance is consistent with his politics of confrontation. His analysis can be taken as a challenge to intellectuals who are not in the Anti-Empire Crowd, even Hawks and Ultra-Hawks, to demonstrate that they: (1) are principled, (2) do offer serious criticism of government policies, (3) do engage in public education and effective political organization, (4) are knowledgeable about international affairs, (5) use that knowledge in shaping their own opinions about American foreign policy, and (6) act with moral purpose and intellectual integrity. I shall do some of these things here. In particular, since Bob states categorically that my “approach to politics exemplifies some of what is wrong with the U.S. academy,” it may be helpful for me also to describe what academics in Texas have been doing before and since 9/11 to influence the political process and be part of national and international political
culture. Such activities across the political spectrum go unacknowledged in Bob's general indictment of the moral passivity and political ineffectiveness of American professors.

The credibility of Bob's indictment is somewhat undercut by his admission that he has done little "to build with colleagues a progressive intellectual community" within our university. It appears he has made little effort to find out what his colleagues have been doing. I know he has never asked me about the extent of my public intellectual work nationally and internationally. Progressive, conservative and moderate intellectual communities all exist at the University of Texas at Austin. They have been active well ahead of the recent trend toward public outreach as a means of securing financial support and political backing for higher education.

What does public political and intellectual life on and around the UT Austin campus look like? It is much different than the impressions given in Bob's paper. For example, our local newspaper, the *Austin American-Statesman* (hereafter *Statesman*) regularly presents a cross-section of intellectual political opinion emanating from UT Austin. The *Statesman* opinion page editors have worked actively in the last five years to tap the university as a resource for informed opinion. There are three regular (about twice a month) op-ed contributors: (1) Gary Chapman of the LBJ School of Public Affairs, who is left of center politically and focuses on local, national, and international political and civic-affairs issues; (2) Marvin Olasky of the School of Journalism, a religious and political conservative allied with the Bush camp and credited with coining the notion "compassionate conservatism"; and (3) myself, writing on higher education, politics and general cultural issues, like military affairs, civil rights, racism, income disparity, free speech and community services, often from a modern or ancient historical perspective. Other professors contribute when they have specialist opinions on issues of the day. James Dee, another classicist, wrote in the week of the invasion of Iraq on how religious belief leads to savagery and violence. He has also written on how the United States is viewed in world affairs. Semi-regular contributors include Ed Dorn, dean of the LBJ School of Public Affairs, and Paul Woodruff, ancient philosopher and head of UT's Plan II Honors Program. Bob's editorials have also appeared in the *Statesman*.

Bob is correct in his general assessment of academics. Many of the 2,800 full-time faculty at the University of Texas at Austin have probably never spoken out publicly, on or off campus, before or after 9/11, on any serious political topic. But this is hardly a revelation or reason for pessimism. Political apathy and shying away from public intellectual discourse is a known feature, or failure, of American culture, inside and outside the academy. The highly stratified power structures of modern multi-national corporate society intensify anxieties about speaking out politically. But it is worth emphasizing that fear of public discourse is a constant within the western tradition from Homer's *Iliad*, the prime Greek enculturating document with a status akin to our Bible, to Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, and now beyond.

As psychiatrist, Jonathan Shay, who works with Vietnam veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, helps us to understand, at the opening of Homer's *Iliad*, the supreme hero, Achilles, has already labored as a tireless, courageous and humane
warrior for ten long years. He has been the workhorse, point man and awe-inspiring combat leader of the Greek forces at Troy. Achilles has conducted numerous successful assaults on nearby communities. The Greek historian, Thucydides, himself a former general, centuries later points out how essential these campaigns were to provisioning the troops during the siege of Troy. Yet, when the leader of the expedition, Agamemnon, is responsible for the outbreak of a terrible plague, and everyone knows it, Achilles alone will speak out. Significantly, even he goes about it circumspectly by persuading the seer Calchas to explain first in public assembly what offense Agamemnon might have committed, and Achilles has to give Calchas strong assurances ahead of time that he will defend Calchas physically when Agamemnon gets angry. When Achilles himself is then publicly dishonored by Agamemnon, no one among the Greek commanders steps forward to speak publicly on his behalf. Achilles’ sense of abandonment and betrayal of what is right leads, in Shay’s opinion, to the destruction of his moral character.

Power has always intimidated people. Most human beings fear public expression. It exposes them to many dangers and takes hard work. Public political and intellectual involvement requires that people first learn well what they will claim to know—because their ideas will be challenged, and their future credibility depends on how well they respond. They then have to express their ideas persuasively, a very forbidding process, whether they are speaking, writing, or acting. They have to say, write, or do things and then react to criticism. Their comforting ideas may be challenged, their long-standing beliefs undercut, or their very security threatened. They may offend intolerant people who are able to do bad things, large and small, to them. They risk hurting those who are closest to them who may not care to be committed to their particular causes. The list of major difficulties, minor pitfalls, and real dangers is long.

Yossarian in Catch 22, modeled by Joseph Heller consciously on Achilles in the Iliad, finds no support for his protests. He discovers that wherever he turns, there is no escaping the system. Almost all of his fellow soldiers, from generals on down, are either covering up, manipulating the system for their own small personal advantage, or doing things that are downright evil. No wonder Catch 22 has become a symbolic phrase for the gerbil cages of our modern lives.

It should not surprise us, then, that few human beings choose to work at bringing about social change. Serious commitment is difficult to sustain. Hard, hard efforts produce small, small results—or none at all. Bob Jensen expresses righteous anger, which many of us share, about privileged academics hiding in their privilege and caring little about social, political, or economic problems. Those who do care often end up cynical. Take Jack Weinberg, coiner of the phrase “Don’t trust anyone over thirty” and a key figure in the Berkeley free-speech movement in the 1960s. Weinberg left academics and, with his wife, devoted the greater portion of his life to union activism. When later asked whether he was proud of his role in establishing the right to free speech on campuses across the United States, he replied: “Yeah. That and ten cents will get me a cup of coffee—or maybe thirty-five cents now.”

The level of commitment needed to improve society can consume individuals.
They may end up alone, disillusioned, dead. A colleague in Theater and Dance at UT Austin, Amparo Garcia-Crow, recently wrote, directed, and produced a community play, *The Unknown Soldier*, based on the life of Gus Garcia, the Texas lawyer who devoted his career in the 1940s and 1950s to legal activism on behalf of Latinos.\(^4\) From 1952 until 1954, Garcia used great skill and energy and his own limited financial resources to argue a landmark civil-rights case, *Hernandez v. State of Texas*, involving nakedly discriminatory jury selection processes. Garcia finally appeared before Chief Justice Earl Warren and the Supreme Court on 11 January 1954. The Supreme Court voted unanimously in favor of Hernandez. Despite this revolutionary success, Garcia’s life spiraled quickly and relentlessly downward. He ended up a ruined and abandoned man. His life is a sanguine lesson about what happens when we dare to confront the powers that be. The Greeks wrote full-blown tragedies conveying the same lesson. Garcia-Crow and her committed public intellectual playwrighting are now examined in a PBS documentary.

It may be wise, then, to reduce our expectations of what human beings can or will do when larger forces prevail against them. This certainly applies to academics as public intellectuals. Extreme confrontational politics by provoking controversy brings issues to public attention. Confrontationalists act as catalysts for those inclined to activism, but at some point, the larger body of citizens must be invited non-confrontationally to think seriously about politics. Most Americans suffer from political agoraphobia, exacerbated now by the stifling cultural tyranny of television and electronic media, by the blurred boundaries between news and entertainment, by economic uncertainty, and by the anonymity of modern life. Americans who feel isolated have very few forums, large or small, where they feel unthreatened enough to speak their opinions candidly about social or political issues. Churches, country and civic clubs, fraternities and sororities, and fraternal orders offer the most meaningful solidarity, but these mainly conservative organizations are not engaged in the kinds of public intellectual activities Bob Jensen would like to see.

Bob is right that most Americans are blind about international affairs. We are given little international news, virtually none from an independent perspective. In a recent lecture at UT Austin (28 March 2003), Chris Hedges, veteran war reporter and winner of the 2002 Amnesty International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism, described television coverage of our war against Iraq as a “video game.” Indeed, the coverage is packaged with reprehensible titles like “Showdown in Iraq” that market mass death and destruction as gun-slinging entertainment. This is possible because our nation and resources are so vast that we can ship 400,000 soldiers to the Middle East and deploy an arsenal of aerial destruction that has not been seen since Operation Rolling Thunder in Vietnam, which had the same unsuccessful “shock and awe” logic, and daily life for most Americans goes on unchanged. Moreover, the multi-faceted historical complexity of US involvement in international affairs is bewildering. Is it any wonder, then, that the current generation of academics who are rewarded for working in narrow fields of specialization
feel uncomfortable venturing into areas of public discourse where they lack professional expertise?

What was going on in central Texas in mid-September 2001 after the WTC tragedy, Robert Jensen’s op-ed in the *Houston Chronicle,* and UT president Larry Faulkner’s response? First, a bit of background as to how I came to be involved. In the early 1990s, as a classicist, I was thoroughly frustrated at my inability to communicate in large undergraduate lecture courses the real power of original ancient Greek texts to students reading them in translation. I therefore began using modern documentary films and real contemporary issues and events to illuminate the realities of social, political, and personal violence and the raw human emotions that are at the core of much ancient Greek literature. For example, we studied the Andrea Yates trial in conjunction with Euripides’ *Medea.* This intellectual and classroom exercise eventually turned into activities such as: (1) co-organizing a public lecture and discussion week “How War Changes Lives” (October 1999); (2) organizing an interdisciplinary faculty discussion on the “Fragility of the Democratic State” with Pulitzer Prize Winner Taylor Branch (April 1997); (3) teaching regular seminars on violence and warfare; (4) writing reviews and op-eds for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (hereafter THES) and the *Statesman,* (4) and organizing campus visits and radio appearances by oral historians, veterans-issue activists, the under-secretary of the Navy, journalists, film writers, and others with specialist expertise on the social meaning of war and violence.

Prominent scholars of classical or ancient Greek culture like Vietnam vets Larry Tritle at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, who works with veterans and students in his regular seminar entitled “Achilles in Vietnam,” and Jim Wright at Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia, who is active in Veterans for Peace, have encouraged me to explore socially and politically meaningful issues, both in scholarly journals and in public settings, for example, the community lectures and discussion groups sponsored by the Humanities Institute at UT Austin. Larry Tritle’s book *From Melos to My Lai* is an excellent example of classical scholarship that speaks passionately to contemporary concerns. Larry has written frank and strong editorials in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Statesman* about war and the politics surrounding war.

My UT colleague, Paul Woodruff, another Vietnam vet, has organized several seminars and lectures on war during the Balkan, 9/11, and Iraqi crises. The well-attended public 9/11 seminar looked at many angles of the tragedy and possible responses. Professors and journalists led discussion and spoke knowledgeably on Middle Eastern politics, international diplomacy and strategy, the mind of George Bush, and our ethical and civic obligations. Paul’s superb book on reverence encourages political and civic involvement and was featured in a PBS interview with Bill Moyers.

It is misleading, then, to represent the UT campus as a place where no meaningful progressive or socially aware and committed public intellectual discourse has been taking place. None of what I have selectively surveyed is Jensenite confrontational politics, but it is honorable, ethically committed, and effective work. My own
reasoning is as follows. If every year I can make twenty to thirty of the brightest students at our state flagship university fully aware, and another 250–300 students even partly aware, of the historical and cultural consequences of war, and the political and cultural factors historically associated with violence and power, then I feel I have had a positive influence on political discourse, because young citizens of privilege have developed new ways of thinking about important social issues. Seminars, op-eds, books, articles, speeches to church groups, and even teaching first- and second-graders about ancient warfare likewise have a significant social and political impact. Paul Woodruff, Amparo García-Crow, Gary Chapman, Ed Dorn, James Dee, Marvin Olasky (and even more nationally and internationally prominent intellectual figures like James K. Galbraith in economics, Philip Bobbitt in international diplomacy and strategy, and Nobel laureate, Steven Weinberg, on science, politics, and defense strategy) might seem to be plowing very narrow furrows, but collectively, they cultivate large portions of the public intellectual field.

In response to several controversies, some involving Bob Jensen, the University of Texas at Austin recently appointed a broad-based committee, headed by constitutional law professor, Douglass Laycock, to study free speech on the UT Austin campus. Laycock’s committee built a strong consensus for the enactment of a free speech policy that, to my knowledge, defines and guarantees free expression far more liberally than policies at other state and private institutions of higher education. One can argue that this outcome required both confrontational political activities and a broad-based coalition of intellectuals acting with strong moral purpose and dedicated to preserving and furthering our personal rights and liberties.

When the Jensen–Faulkner controversy arose, I was serving on the executive committee of the Faculty Council. I pointed out in the Faculty Council, in personal email exchanges with President Faulkner, and later in a specially commissioned article for the THES that Bob Jensen’s Houston Chronicle piece had mirrored in its logic an article written for a Spanish-language periodical by Carlos Fuentes:

Fuentes added the September 11 slaughter of innocents to his own list of sacrileges against humanity within living memory: Verdun and the Marne, Guernica and Coventry, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Tlatelolco and Rio Mozote.

While stating categorically that nothing can justify the World Trade Center–Pentagon atrocity, he expressed concern that Americans would remain myopic about the international actions of their government. He produced a second list, a catalogue of crimes against humanity over the past 40 years in Vietnam, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Iraq and the Balkans, all, in his view, attributable to foreign-policy decisions made by “los Estados Unidos de Amnesia.”

I then argued that to claim, as Faulkner had, that Jensen had become “a fountain of undiluted foolishness” was to claim that Fuentes was also. (Of course, some of my Latin Americanist colleagues told me that, in their opinion, Fuentes was such a fountain.) In a personal email to President Faulkner (20 September 2001), I pointed out that he had spoken in virtual agreement with Bob Jensen during the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance when he said, “Vengeance is less important than
learning how to make the world a safer and more civilized place, and less important than retaining our best character as we respond.” My exact words were:

I do not think Robert Jensen’s views, as expressed in today’s Statesman, are very much at odds with this fundamental sentiment of yours. He simply has done us the service of reminding us—counter to the prevailing wave of extreme patriotic fervor—that in many areas of the world the United States has come over the last 50+ years to represent the use of extreme force against civilian targets or what is euphemistically called collateral damage upon civilians: N. Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, all starting with Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Faulkner’s short letter to the Houston Chronicle twice emphasized Robert Jensen’s free-speech rights—and did so in a serious way, not just as window-dressing. Faulkner’s intellectually dismissive rhetorical strategy counteracted what many considered the inappropriate tone of Bob’s piece—in contrast to Fuentes’—at a time when Americans were in collective mourning at the equivalent of a national funeral. In my opinion, President Faulkner had few other options in the political climate that then prevailed. His response to Bob’s editorial protected UT Austin faculty, at the cost of trivializing the serious discourse that should have been taking place. Bob might view the protection Faulkner provided as a negative example of ivory-tower elitism. I do not, because I view the university as a sanctuary of secular and humanistic knowledge from which intellectuals can have an impact upon the political process and public thought. I am grateful that Larry Faulkner protected us. At the same time, in New York, City University of New York trustees were calling for the resignation of faculty who conducted a mere informational seminar.

Reading Bob’s paper has not changed my view of events following his Houston Chronicle piece. He believes that my seeing both sides in this situation is “an inability or unwillingness to form a clear conclusion.” I think it is seeing complexity in complex matters and trying to get parties to work collectively towards a common goal. Both President Faulkner and Robert Jensen appealed for careful thought and moderation of policy in the aftermath of 9/11. My aim, whether right or wrong, was to get Bob to be less polarizing and to reinforce President Faulkner’s admirable instincts to listen to what faculty have to say and to act with strong moral integrity. It takes lots of effort to maintain politeness in discourse and to use established venues for discussion and decision-taking even on emotionally charged issues. This in fact is what many Americans on the left and many citizens of the world, including, I presume, Bob Jensen, wish the Bush administration had done vis-à-vis the United Nations during the current Iraqi crisis.

At the risk of being confrontational, I believe that: (1) Robert Jensen’s writings and political activities are dismissive of alternative, non-confrontational strategies to influence the political process, say, through public intellectual discourse; (2) he projects a severe black-and-white view of politics and what politically aware academics should be doing; and (3) his Houston Chronicle piece is rhetorically exclusionary. He views things like the title character of Sophocles’ Antigone. My own counter-view is that contemporary Creons, Haemons, and Ismenes should be
embraced in trying to effect political change, not alienated from the entire process or left to what Plato would term their “false opinions.”

My own philosophy is captured in correspondence with Evan Carton, director of UT’s Humanities Institute, about organizing a post-9/11 faculty seminar (16 September 2001):

By the time “it” could be organized, “it” might lead into the tendency to perpetuate discussion of the “event” (a kind of talking-headification) rather than to focus on meaningful collateral issues, e.g., the not-so-latent imperialism/racism in certain forms of proposed organized and individual responses, the myopia of Americans on issues of security, and the fairy-tail thinking of Americans about how we are viewed in the world as a result of our international actions of the last 40 years, and so on.

If the event could really get people to view matters soberly, that would be fine.

My views of US policies, and those of several of my UT colleagues whose work I described above, are not very different from Bob Jensen’s. We do, however, have different ways of going about things.

Bob says that I am wrong to claim that his Houston Chronicle piece is inflammatory. He claims that the Bush administration started the argument, which was further fomented by members of Congress, pundits, TV anchors, and others. But he goes on to admit that he did not care then, and now still does not care, whether the piece is inflammatory. He knew it would anger the majority of Americans. He aimed at galvanizing the progressive people who might be struggling with how to respond. Concerning the collateral damage he wrought on the majority of readers, he admits he made a deliberate choice to alienate them, in order to rally the few. However, as the Laycock free-speech commission demonstrates, someone has to use less confrontational, non-Jensenite measures of intellectual and political persuasion upon the great majority if change is to be effected through the democratic process. Democratic change in the United States still requires a majority, or, as our last presidential election showed, a near-majority vote.

Bob claims that he does not delight in the politics of confrontation, although it is his chosen strategy. He explains that the exhilaration (“adrenaline rush”) he experiences at moments of political action is followed by incredible sadness after the fact. In my opinion, it does not matter how sad Bob Jensen feels when he is at home alone with his thoughts. Readers of Robert Jensen’s writings and his confrontational political activities only know what he says and does as a public persona. What matters then is how the persona in Robert Jensen’s public writing, statements, and actions is perceived.

Let us take the Houston Chronicle piece. What if its author cared both about rallying far left potential-activist supporters and about being reverent toward the feelings of readers who are truly ignorant about American international affairs, but know that thousands of lives were lost in an unspeakably cruel and vicious act of terrorism that they witnessed live on television? One thing s/he might avoid, and which Carlos Fuentes did avoid in his elegant essay, is excessive “me-ism.” In the first two sentences of the Houston Chronicle piece, the words I, me, my are used seven times. They are used sixteen times in this short editorial before it ever collectivizes
any sentiments or invites unified response by using the word we. In fact, the piece only suggests what we should do as a people in the last two paragraphs. Nowhere does it invite its reader into its author’s highly emotional reactions or indicate if others feel as he does. Nowhere does it substantiate or legitimize its author’s claims about US atrocities for what he knows will be a skeptical readership. As a consequence, the general reader, i.e., the politically conservative Texan, merely witnesses a lone penman blasting off in anger, again, let us remember, on the occasion of a national funeral when most readers were in deep shock and mourning, and thoroughly traumatized by what they had witnessed.

Given the circumstances, Bob’s self-admittedly “inflammatory” piece was not reasonable. Bob says he did not care about the majority of readers who needed to be persuaded in such trying times. This is unfortunate. Bob argues that he presented “accurate, factual evidence.” In fact, he simply makes assertions and offers no evidence for them. Many Texas intellectuals like me essentially agree with what Bob says about the questionable morality of American foreign policy and its negative effects on other countries. But the Houston Chronicle piece offended a large number of Texans with its unilateral egotism, and they lit up the switchboards in the UT president’s office.

The very title of Robert Jensen’s Houston Chronicle editorial offended many people. When the piece appeared on the Common Dreams website (12 September 2001), it was entitled “Stop the Insanity Here.” Americans could respond with their hearts to this “reasonable and inoffensive” title. When the piece appeared in the Houston Chronicle two days later, its title screamed “U.S. Just as Guilty of Committing Own Violent Acts.” I pointed this change of title out to many people, UT President Larry Faulkner among them, as an extenuating factor. However, in retrospect, I think that the polarizing force of the Houston Chronicle title better captures the tone of the editorial and its effect on most readers. What I find most unfortunate and politically counter-productive is that Bob Jensen still claims that he does not care about them.

Notes

[1] In this paper, I take up issues raised by Robert Jensen in his paper “September 11 and the Failures of American Intellectuals,” in this number of Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies. His paper is a revised version of a talk given to the Canadian Association of University Teachers Disciplining Dissent conference, Ottawa, 1 November 2002.


For a sample of Weinberg’s work in these areas, cf. http://www.nybooks.com/authors/201.